

Chefs, cooks, and caterers are often looking for high quality, interesting, unusual, and seasonal ingredients they can incorporate into outstanding meals. They are also looking for supplier partnerships that contribute to their brand. Products that are hard to find through mainstream food suppliers, like heirloom or heritage products, unique varieties, or wild foraged foods, tend to be in higher demand. Likewise, products that are available early or late in the season or through the winter tend to be in higher demand.

This fact sheet includes information on:

- How to get started.
- Benefits and challenges.

How to Get Started

There are roughly 15,600 restaurants in Washington according to the Washington Restaurant Association. Many restaurants are independently owned and operated and tend to be the best place for farmers to start. Most chain restaurants source solely from large distributors and have standard menus that depend on regular deliveries of a limited number of fresh ingredients. To increase the likelihood of developing a good customer, seek out establishments that offer daily or weekly specials or that feature seasonal or local menus. A chef that values local sourcing is more likely to be willing to take the extra steps to develop a successful relationship with a farmer. Many caterers that specialize in local and seasonal menus will make forward-contract agreements for significant quantities of farm products and **flowers at premium prices**.

Selling to restaurants or caterers can be both profitable and demanding. Whether providing a single ingredient for a special event or supplying a vast array of produce for the menu, this type of customer relationship demands appreciation for the interdependence of your farm's consistent high-quality supply and the expectations in the kitchen and in the dining room. A strong partnership is enhanced when the farmer tends toward "under promising and over delivering." Some farmers say they can learn a lot about a chef's expectations of quality, use of ingredients, and how to harvest for restaurants by spending time with a chef in their kitchen.

Networking meetings or tradeshow can also be opportunities to meet chefs. Regional organizations like Sustainable Connections sustainableconnections.org also host farmer-chef connection trade events throughout the year. Search to see if there is a similar offering in your area.

Establishing a relationship with a restaurant often begins with a visit. It is best to call ahead to make an appointment at a time that works for them. Do not call chefs at meal times.

At the initial meeting, your job is to:

- Share your farm story, the variety of products you offer, and seasonal availability.
- Bring a copy of your "fresh sheet" and pricing.
- Bring samples for the chef to try.
- Learn from the chef which items they are seeking, and in what quantities.
- Identify packing options and whether you offer any minimally processed products (e.g. chopped or washed).
- Confirm any timing parameters for orders or deliveries.
- Share the best way to get in touch with you.
- Follow up via email, text, or call to summarize and attach your fresh sheet.

Fresh Sheets

A critical tool for weekly orders is the fresh sheet. Delivered via email on the same day every week, a fresh sheet is a spreadsheet that lists what you have to sell, including the product name and variety, price, volume available, and how to contact you. Sometimes farmers include notes about the taste, texture, smell, or appearance of each item. Increasingly, farms and food hubs are able to link their fresh sheets to their online ordering system, adding convenience for the chef.

A business that sells foraged foods may find it useful to create a harvest calendar, similar to a fresh sheet. A calendar of wild foraged foods is available for download at chefs-resources.com. Search for "Washington Seasonal Foraging Chart".

Benefits and Challenges

Benefits of selling directly to restaurants

- Great market for smaller quantities of high quality items.
- Creates an opportunity to build a strong relationship between the farm and chef.
- A higher price point is often available.
- Can take non-standard sizes, and products may not have to be graded.
- The farm may be featured on the menu and in the media, with potential to attract other direct-market customers, like CSA members or other retail outlets.

Challenges of selling directly to restaurants

- Farms need to be in constant communication with restaurants, which can take a lot of time.
- It may be difficult to match delivery times with restaurant needs.
- Farm must deliver high-quality product every time, and be responsive to the chef's needs.
- Restaurants may order small quantities.
- Farm will need to establish and maintain good bookkeeping systems.
- Farm must be able to provide clear invoicing and delivery receipts, and manage detailed accounting and recordkeeping.
- Farm may need good cash-flow management to sustain a delayed payment schedule.

Most restaurants do not pay on delivery, and may pay monthly. It is important to keep track of deliveries and always be sure to get a signed invoice in duplicate. File one copy in your records. If an account is delinquent beyond the agreed upon terms, be cautious about continuing the relationship.

The "Selling to Restaurants, A Farmer's Guide," published by localfoodmarketplace.com, gives tips and hints for developing direct market relationships with chefs and others.



5. Licensing

9. Insurance

11. Direct Marketing in Washington State

13. Selling Online: E Commerce

18. Selling through Food Hubs

23. WSDA Food Processor License and Facilities